

The Curse of the Scarabæus.
W. Dyke, in "St. Andrew's Gazette," 1.

It is now nearly fourteen years ago that I had received a hasty note from a colleague inviting me to meet him in consultation upon a case which, to use his words, had "entirely baffled all efforts to arrive at the cause, or to afford permanent relief to the sufferer."

During the earlier years of my practice I had found sufficient leisure time to devote myself to the study of brain diseases, and had written some essays on the subject, one of them receiving honorable notice in the transactions of the society of which I was a member. From the tenor of Dr. Wilson's letter I judged that I was to be called in as a specialist to see his patient, whose mental powers had apparently become affected, and as I was glad to have the opportunity of investigating any instance of cerebral derangement which might offer itself, I lost no time in sending an affirmative reply.

Late in the afternoon of the same day I accordingly found myself in the study of Sir Robert Pensmyth's house, and was cordially welcomed by Dr. Wilson, who had been awaiting my arrival.

"I'm heartily glad to see you, Harford," he said, "not only for the sake of 'auld lang syne' and the cheery days we used to pass together at Tom's, but also because I am thoroughly puzzled about this case of Sir Robert's. He's as sane as you or I upon most points, but upon one particular fact he's as mad as—well, he's mad."

"Well, then, some ten days ago—or, to be exact, last Wednesday week, I was sent for to see him. I have attended the family, off and on, for years, but never Sir Robert. His health has been exceptionally good, and I have frequently remarked to Lady Pensmyth—you recollect Mabel Casier, don't you?—that his life was such as an assurance office would covet. I came expecting to find that he had a touch of liver, or something of that sort, but to my amazement there was nothing the matter with him physically. He simply as it were, told me by asserting that there was a living insect inside his head, and that it was slowly but surely making an end of him! Now you know well enough, Harford, that such a thing cannot be, and yet he insists on this as a positive fact, though he refuses to give any reason for his belief. There's no doubt that his brain is affected in some way, for the agony which he has undergone since Thursday convinces me of that, but I candidly admit I cannot diagnose the disease. The man's stark mad on this question, and I know of no one better qualified than yourself to help me to look into it."

I expressed my willingness to assist my friend, and we together went into Sir Robert's bedroom. "I have brought Dr. Harford to see you, Sir Robert," said Dr. Wilson.

"What, Jack Harford?" exclaimed the baronet, who was lying on a couch drawn up close to the fire.

"No, not Jack. You will remember he died in India. This is his younger brother, Philip."

"Well, it's all the same! I've got this internal beetle eating away the life of me, and none of your vexatious drugs or treatment can do me any good. I'm sorry, doctor, if I have spoken too brusquely, but I know what is the matter with me—and you don't."

"Perhaps you will allow me, Sir Robert, to ask you a question or two?" I began to say, when he bounded off the sofa, with a scream more like that which one might imagine would emanate from a lost soul than from any human being. And then commenced the most awful scene I have ever witnessed! I have been present at the deathbeds of men who have been consumed by the most painful of diseases; I have seen the last agonies of those who have been mangled and crushed in accidents, where every breath drawn has been but a prolongation of excruciating torment; but never could I have believed it possible for one to undergo such maddening tortures, such intense anguish, as that which Sir Robert Pensmyth was then enduring. His eyes were almost forced from their sockets, huge beads of perspiration burst forth on his forehead, his teeth were gnashing, his features were hideously distorted, and his whole body was quivering with the severity of the throes which had surely seized him! The sight was appalling in the extreme, and even to me, cool headed as I thought myself, it appeared as if the Powers of Darkness had united to wreak vengeance upon their unhappy victim, whose unceasing shrieks and wallings were sufficient to unnerve the strongest man. For nearly half an hour was this tragedy continued, and then utterly exhausted, the unhappy creature sank upon the floor, and covering his face with his trembling hands, moaned out: "It moves! It moves!"

Dr. Wilson and I regarded each other with awe-struck silence, and whispering to him, "I can do nothing now; let us meet again to-morrow," I left the room.

The next morning I received the following note:

"Dear Harford—You will be sorry to learn that poor Sir Robert died last night. Come to the house as soon as you can. I want to see you.—Yours sincerely, "P. WILSON."

Under the signature, evidently an afterthought, was written: "There is a mystery in the case, which I hope to unravel."

On complying with Dr. Wilson's wish—which I did as early as engagements with my own patients would permit—I was again ushered in the study. This time, however, I had to wait—so long, in fact, that I began to consider the desirability

of postponing the appointment, when the door opened and my friend entered.

"Sorry I kept you waiting, but Lady Harford asked me to go through her husband's papers, in the hope of finding something which may throw a light upon the terrible visitation we beheld last night. She placed in my hands, as an old friend, Sir Robert's diary, which he kept when travelling in Egypt before his marriage. I have just finished going through it, and I should like you to look at this passage. I have Lady Pensmyth's permission to show it to you, though she is so fearfully cut up that she cannot see any one yet besides her own family and myself."

I looked at the page pointed out, and read as follows:

"June 16, '79. "Started for the Pyramids again and this time succeeded in entering one of the smaller ones. That thief, Hassan, tried to dissuade me by rolling off some of his old woman's tales, saying there was a curse upon it, and so on. Shut him up, and said I didn't want any of his superstitious nonsense. Opened a sarcophagus, and rummaged about in it, but found nothing except some fragments of papyrus and a few mummified beetles. Showed them to Hassan, who fell on his knees, and begged me to leave them there, as there was an old legend, which I made out to be something like this: "Whoever touch the beetle shall die by the beetle." Told him I didn't believe such rubbish, and that I meant to take them, as they were specimens of a rare scarab I had not seen before. Packed all up and gave Hassan a kick to make him move. Got safely out at last but with difficulty—as somehow—I believe it was a device of that rascal's—I was tripped up, and nearly lost my parcel."

"Mem.—Don't employ Hassan again."

"What do you think of it?" inquired Wilson, when I handed back the diary.

"Much the same as I did before," was my reply. "I think Sir Robert was suffering from an acute attack of the brain, and, no doubt, between the paroxysms, he remembered more vividly than customary the occurrence related in the diary, and although he was evidently not an impressionable man, the weakness which supervened on each attack gave an increasing force and color to the tradition, and led him to regard it first as a possibility, then probable, and last as an absolute certainty. That he could have been killed by what he himself describes as 'a mummified beetle' is palpably ridiculous. But what have you there?" I asked, regarding a small cardboard box which Dr. Wilson was in the act of opening.

"These are the 'beetles,'" he answered; and I looked with curiosity and interest at some half-dozen insects, dry and dead for thousands of years, which lay before me. Certainly, they were specimens of a scarabæus unknown to me, but I had never had time for the study of Egyptology, and my acquaintance with the subject having only resulted from desultory reading, I could not therefore pronounce definitely upon them.

They were about the size of ladybirds, or perhaps a trifle larger, with backs of an emerald green color thickly studded with spots of purple-black, and as I examined them I could hardly repress a smile at what I deemed the childish fancy that had invested these harmless atoms with a potency so dire.

"Now, Wilson," I remarked, "what is it you want me to do, for I don't suppose you have brought me round here simply to show me these things?"

"Yes, I have, in one sense; but there is more than that. It is the wish of the family that a post-mortem should be made. I might, perhaps, feel justified in certifying the cause of death; but it would be a great satisfaction to me—and to you also, I do not doubt—if you would fall in with my views and help me to carry them out."

"I'll do so with pleasure, not only because it is your request, but also because, as you are aware, I take a lively interest in questions of this kind, and the result may tend to confirm a theory I advanced when Peterhoff and I were engaged in a discussion in '81."

The room was prepared for the operation, and all necessary arrangements were made.

We carefully set to work, removing the outer covering, and laying bare the bones of the skull. A minute or so later and the brain was exposed, and this we cautiously proceeded to separate.

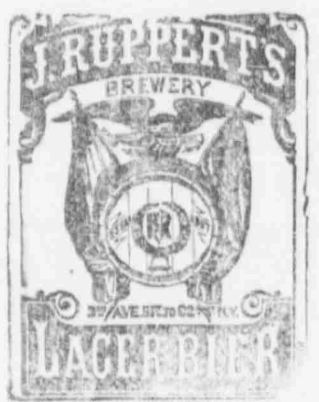
Judge our consternation and horror when, embedded in the nerve matter, we discovered a living, moving insect, the exact counterpart of the scarabæus brought from the Pyramids by the ill-fated Sir Robert!

It had thus done him to death, and, though all else remains an impenetrable mystery, it is certain that literally and awfully was the curse fulfilled.

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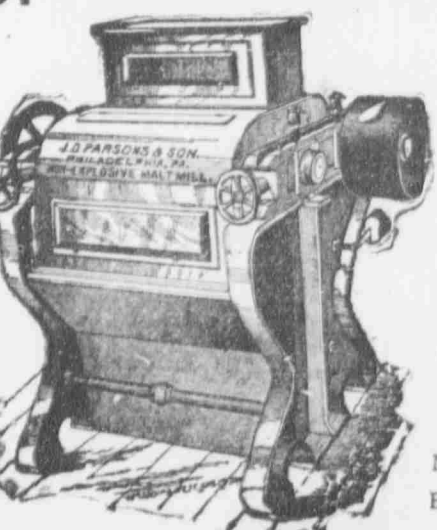
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